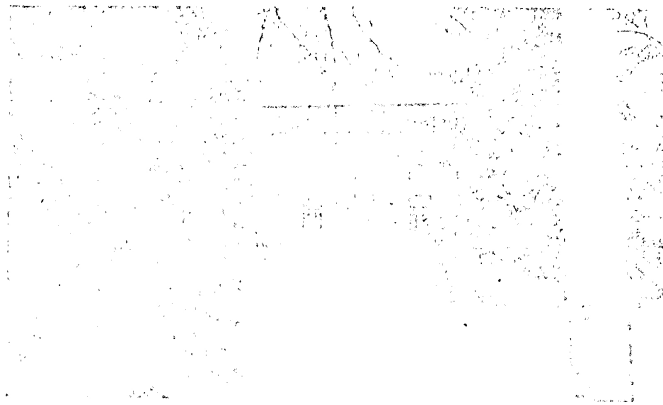


McMurrin - Theology

WEEK-DAY

Religious
Education

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY,
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Toward a Christian Ethic

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(A possible interpretation of the moral teachings of Jesus in terms of the Mormon concept of Deity.)

IT is not inconceivable that the moral dilemma that obtains in religion generally is the direct result of a seeming paradox suggested by the very nature of the Christian ethic. The problem at least justifies an accurate statement in the light of its implications for a practical interpretation of that ethic and for a possible resolution of the dilemma by a reconsideration of the fundamental ethico-religious postulates. Christianity as a prophetic religion has established an absolute ethical ideal descriptive of the ultimate in human nature, but which inadequately relates to the particular moral personality in its problem of conduct. At least this is the significant and tragic judgment of history, which saw the beginnings of a dualism in the rise of Pauline asceticism and the adoption of the Platonic metaphysic.

Love as the foundation principle of morality, as indeed of life itself, constitutes nevertheless a standard more or less transcendent to human nature, which is obviously characterized primarily by the fact of self-assertion. Its presence, even as an approximation to the absolute, is a rare achievement of individual personality and is quite unknown as a factor in social consciousness. So the primitive Church was quick to despair, affirming the total inherent depravity of human nature and ascribing whatever salvation to the infinite grace of a benevolent God. Moral achievement was seen as a mere appearance, while the resolution of the whole tragedy was sought in an other-worldly apocalyptic cataclysm. Thus the court of orthodoxy, which rightfully sought a religious depth for morality but unwittingly destroyed its breadth and made the Sermon on the Mount subservient to a pagan metaphysic.

The modern description of moral values as relative was an inevitable objection to the system that for centuries had main-

tained the reality of the absolute while denying the human possibility of its realization. Reason arose in justified indignation at the moral pessimism of a religion of redemption and proclaimed a reality for temporal values, identifying morality with folkways and racial custom. The evolutionary nature of values was easily recognized as organic to the natural processes of the world, so morality was freed from dogma and the abstractions of theology and was given a new meaning and life as capable of achievement though relative in character. Accordingly, men turned toward the admirable task of creating a better social order, determined to find salvation in the realities of the temporal rather than alone in an apocalyptic hope. Thus did morality regain its breadth.

But the reaction, however great its service to the just cause of humanity, has not been too satisfactory, for the axioms of positivism sounded the death knell of theism, and what was at first a healthy agnosticism has become a dangerous sophistry. God has disappeared from His heaven and with Him the eternal foundation of the moral law, for man and reason are upon the throne and morality is a transitory opinion. Perhaps the statement is too simple, but the problem is real, and its implication for the future of religion and moral progress is the most significant consideration challenging the human race.

Formal and practical objections to the dilemma are many, but on traditional ground they must fail before the contradiction of the absolute and the finite. The possibility of finite man attaining to an absolute value must either be denied or the foundation concept of the absolute and particular be radically questioned. To deny either and accept the other as the true description of ethics is to give formal sanction to either a narrow other-worldliness or a

dangerous naturalism, both of which constitute a moral hazard. To deny on the ground of "common sense" that any theoretical resolution of a moral situation can have a practical value, is to refuse the verdict of history, which loudly testifies of the influence of theology on the conduct of the race. And to deny the dilemma by an unconditional acceptance of both the absolute and finite is to invite the criticism of a sound logic and fall into the same error whereby the Augustinians perverted the cause of Christianity for more than a millennium. If absolute universals actually exist, their essence is their universality, while the essence of particulars is their particularity. If it is argued that human virtue exists through the participation of the particular in the absolute, the natural argument logically to deny the dilemma, the nature of these essences must at least be qualified, for the particular must partake either of the whole universal or of its part. If the universal is known in its wholeness, however, it must exist as a whole in each of several separate particulars, thus requiring it to be separated from itself, which would necessarily destroy its unity and thus deny its own absoluteness. While if it be admitted, seemingly to escape such a consequence, that the particular participates in only a part of the universal, equally destructive is the implication. For the part of the universal thus existing in the particular constitutes in itself a logical contradiction, in that, being in itself a part of a whole, it becomes itself a logical contradiction, while at the same time proposing absolute universality as its essential nature. A third course, moreover, which appears at first as a likely escape from the dilemma, proves equally futile. If it is argued that participation is simply resemblance, there is implied a likeness, i. e., a common essence, with which both the particular and the universal have a faculty in common, for a resemblance of two things is not a participation of one in the other, but a likeness of each to a separate essence, which then becomes the universal. And resemblance to this new universal calls forth another higher, and so on, thus

demanding an infinity which in itself denies the possibility of any absolute. It would seem, therefore, that the only logical position to be taken with respect to universals as existent absolutes is agnostic. For if the particular can enjoy no participation in the universal, human experience, being a particular, can know nothing of that universal. Whatever divine absolutes may exist, they must be quite irrelevant to the nature of man—such the consequence of the medieval theology, which accepted the absolute. And such, also, is the consequence of the contemporary positivism which accepts the particulars.

Of course, the problem is often avoided on the ground that the nature of the ethical principle of Jesus does not involve an absolute concept. Such a stand, however, is simply to acknowledge humanism and deny the very essence of the Gospel. Christianity cannot maintain its prophetic insight if its Founder be reduced to the status of a moralist, however great. The genius of His message is the "Kingdom of God," nothing less. Morality itself, though indispensable, is nevertheless secondary, the law of the second commandment. The first is the love of God, and the commandment permits of no qualification, but is absolute. Whatever morality does not emanate therefrom is not the morality of the Son of God.

Moreover, to insist the popular notion that Jesus legislated primarily for the temporal needs of humanity is to ignore the real significance of His ethic. No amount of sentimentality can hope to raise a perfect social order with contemporary humanity suddenly immersed in an absolute purity of heart. The paradox is too apparent. In an order where justice must be a virtue, by whom can it be established under the universal law, "Judge ye not." And in a personality that seems to know nothing but self-assertion, what is the meaning of the divine warning, "He that loveth his life shall lose it"? The ideal at best has been approximated only as an intuition of a few lone personalities. It is almost foreign to the hopes of collective living, as in a sense

it appears even inimical to the nature of that living. And let it be repeated that any attempt to explain away the paradox by a "practical" reinterpretation of the principle must be destructive. The Christian ethic is more than a mere legislation for personal and social morality. It is an aspect of the revelation of God. Its essence is found not so much in the oft-quoted "Render unto Caesar" as in the divine and incomprehensible agony of Gethsemane.

It is apparent that the difficulty can be resolved not by any superficial reinterpretation of the nature of practical morality, but only by a reconsideration of the fundamental postulates of the particular and absolute, finite and infinite, human and divine. The logical paradox that maintains so consistently must be destroyed by a new definition that will essentially identify the terms, with only intensity or degree as a differentia. In spite of the paradox it suggests, the particular must become a little less particular, and the absolute a little less absolute, that man may commune with God and achieve a measure of the perfection described for him.

Such a theoretical atonement demands a new concept of God as a moral being. The necessary implication here is that the nature of God must be characterized essentially by the *sine qua non* of every ethic, the metaphysical freedom of the will. The divine will must be theoretically, though not practically, capable of both good and evil, that morality may be given a divine foundation. It is just here that the absolute and particular are reconciled, for the same morally free will is the essential nature of man. So man and God are not so far apart: one is in the image of the other.

This essential identification of the human and the divine, the objection to which rests necessarily on the purely arbitrary nature of traditional categories, which need not therefore be regarded as sacred, resolves the original dilemma by denying the metaphysical contradiction of the absolute and particular. The possibility of the absolute and particular as co-existent manifes-

tations of both the divine and human involves a consideration of the psychic nature of personality not possible here. But it may be suggested that personality as the conscious subject of experience, the reality of which must be assumed if reality is to be real, offers an adequate solution to the foundation paradox of metaphysics, the antinomy of the one and the many, and therefore resolves the ethical dilemma. For the self as the subject of consciousness must consist first of a permanent identity, without which the time-transcending purposiveness which is immediately evident in the self's activity would be impossible, and secondly, of a series of finite conscious states. In the self's identity lies the infinite and absolute, and in its content of conscious states, the finite and particular. Here in the *unitas multiplex* of personality, whether divine or human, is one and many, changelessness and change, the eternal ethic and the temporal morality. Here in the same person is the absolute purity of heart which Jesus taught, and from which there is no appeal, and the faint, yet struggling, purity of the sinner which Jesus loved.

The escape from the pessimism of Platonism demands further the identification of value with the will of God, rather than with any existent entities. Morality thereby becomes a creative process that has no meaning apart from experience. The nature of personality is *becoming* rather than *being*. Its essential characteristic is its creative capacity, the functioning of the will operating under the forms designated by the purposive intellect. The form, or ideal, is of the nature of the absolute, whether it be in God or in man. But it is not enough to characterize only conduct, which is the particular, as a changing value. For the ideal itself is a process. This, however, does not destroy its absolute nature, for as the will of God it is an aspect of the world ground itself. All things by their very nature participate in the evolution of the universe, and morality can be no exception. But when firmly grounded in deity its ideal can remain an absolute.

So virtue consists in the approximation of the practical to the ideal. In God alone has this approximate achieved identity. But perfection depends not upon this identity, but rather upon the fulfillment of the individual capacity for approaching the ideal, while at the same time consciously expanding that ideal. Since the nature of man precludes an absolute identity of the practical and the ideal, it follows that man may achieve perfection in his finite sphere without realizing the absolute in practice.

Perfection is in the achieving, and not the achievement.

So life is a creative adventure with God in an unfinished world. Human nature is not depraved, nor is the world bad. They are whatever men make them in their eternal struggle to achieve the Divine. And all this is found in the beautiful admonition of One who did—"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Teaching Religion by Word of Mouth

DR. LOWELL L. BENNION

RELIGIOUS fervor is not inherited. One acquires it only to the degree that he associates religion with that which is most real and meaningful in his life—the decisions he makes, the convictions he lives by, his satisfactions, hopes, and aspirations, and significant happenings.

How can the teacher help the student identify religion with life? He will, of course, avail himself of progressive educational processes, by which the student experiences subtly his religion in life-projects and situations. The teacher will recollect also the influence of example—the warmth of personality and integrity of character of certain of his own teachers. In conjunction with these and others not mentioned there remains a third method of teaching. One that is much used, abused, and misused. Discredited by some, apologized for by others, and traditionally applied by many, it merits consideration, if for no other reason than because of its wide use. We refer to the spoken word, the explanation of the Gospel in the classroom, before the fireplace, over the pulpit, and in the office.

The spoken word, like the written word, need not be so far removed from life. Recognizing with due consideration all remarks to the contrary, the student does not always learn of life best by contacting it

directly. The happenings and impressions of the student's life do not weave themselves voluntarily into a single meaningful wholeness. They flow into a constantly changing maze of feeling and thought. The student depends on the interpretations of others for direction, and words are still some of man's most effective symbols with which to convey meanings.

The literary genius is not untrue to life. Even his "fiction" is drawn from life itself where one finds more hate and love, despair and hope, tragedy and joy than have ever been printed in books. Yet the skillful writer with eyes to see and ears to hear and the talent to express his keener insight and deeper understanding singles out tragedy, builds a plot around it, holds our attention to it until we feel it more intensely than in life itself. This is not because he exaggerates or falsifies, nor because tragedy is artificial or foreign to real life. It results from his ability to isolate some feeling or thought, cast the spot-light of understanding on its shadows and clarify its place on the horizon, whereas previously it had been obscured in a labyrinth of subjective experience.

In this manner Jesus, the artist in parable, interpreted life for his listeners. So real are His illustrations in the Good Samaritan that tourists today trustfully

